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Comments to the State Board of Education on June 17, 2014

Redesigning the Organization and Financing of Michigan Schools

The future of Michigan rests in the State Board of Education's priority for 2013-14 to: "Lead in developing a vision and comprehensive plan for redesigning Michigan school organization and finance that supports attainment of robust learning standards, necessary skills, and good outcomes for all students; and that provides the requisite, predictable and fairly delivered public funding to reasonably achieve these goals."

To that end, studying other states, gaining input from the field and taking a good look at results gained from Michigan's actions to date is an excellent start. Hopefully this work will be guided by researched best practices as all involved agree that education of our children must be above politics.

Fortunately, evidence abounds in terms of what works in the teaching and learning process. Each year valid studies teach us more about engaging students in learning. Unfortunately there have been many distractions to getting those things that work into the daily practice of our schools. How we organize schools and what public policies we put in place to guide their management must foster those things proven to work and should not distract those who work in our schools from doing that work.

To that end we need the Michigan Department of Education to be **the** state school system and it needs to be a system that supports all schools operating within it. That support must:

- provide the field with evidence about what works,
- ensure that federal and state resources are provided for schools to use in the most flexible manner for their own improvement,
- guide schools to audit themselves to find what is and is not working, and
- intervene in meaningful ways when schools are unable to move the bar for student achievement to proficiency.

This should be done through an office established for school improvement and reform – an office that uses multiple options for intervention that have been proven to work.

All schools in this system need to be held accountable to quality learning standards. For locally governed, comprehensive K-12 school districts, for charter schools, for cyber schools, for State Office of Reform Schools, the interim goal ought to be around 90% student proficiency in the core subjects of English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies with no identifiable gaps in achievement between groups of students. Once the state reaches 90% proficiency it could raise the bar. The path to 90% must be very focused, not be interrupted by political pressures and agendas, and, as mentioned earlier, proven strategies would be identified and implemented with authenticity.

The delivery system for achieving this goal will start with the Michigan Department of Education, be deployed by Intermediate School Districts across the state, supported by university and business partners, and implemented by all public schools in the state. Driving the effort to this goal of 90% proficiency will be the default for all decisions and policies. For schools that continue to be persistently low performing, the office established for school improvement and reform will need to put interventions in place. Data and research will be used to set the timelines, but it might be that once schools are put on the persistently low performing list they would have three years to show statistically significant improvements in identified student learning metrics. If no improvements are made then the office for school improvement and reform will place the school into one of several research-based school interventions including entities like the EAA (once its model is proven to work), an ISD intervention (based on models that have been proven to work), an inter-local agreement with a successful neighboring school district, or a transfer to a third party operator that has a record of success in turning around underperforming schools.

One of the most important policy decisions that will have to be made to support this kind of effort is to NOT impose one-size-fits-all mandates onto our schools. The diversity across Michigan is one of its great strengths and that diversity must be honored by policy-makers that understand each community will need to get to the goal in a slightly different way. The toolbox of “what works” is known, but how and when those tools need to be used for a particular school will be different and which of those tools will be most effective for groups of students will be different as well. That is why the process must include a comprehensive school audit of strengths and needs before an intervention plan is developed. Many states use audits such as these and Michigan should study those from the highest performing states to improve its current process.

In establishing an accountability framework, it must be recognized that improving school quality and gaining high levels of student proficiency are not simple metrics and can’t be accurately depicted by a single color, grade or number. It is a complex combination of a number of things. Rather than try to inform the public about a school’s status within an accountability system by a single definer, we should have each school report its status and progress through a common dashboard that would give the public easy to understand facts about their schools. One of the metrics on the dashboard should be student proficiency in the core subjects; others could be graduation rate, drop-out rate, percent of students in honors/AP courses, class size, percent of highly qualified teachers, fund balance, demographic information, courses offered including electives, and for K-12 schools and districts the percent of graduates entering college and successfully completing their freshman year with no remediation.

Of course, all of the above requires resources of highly skilled people with expertise in the field, a political and governance system that will stay the course; and stable, adequate funding to keep it all moving forward. It is long past time for Michigan to complete an adequacy study for funding its schools. This has been done by dozens of states – Michigan can learn from them and use the same resources they used. It is clear from data

that Michigan funding for its schools has gone from a high rank to a lower one. A trend like this does not help raise our state to higher levels on the achievement rankings.

Having done their homework with a school funding study, other states have altered their funding formulas to better provide resources where most needed. Proposal A may have been good for the 90s, but it is not adequate for this century. Once our study is done, there will likely be a finding that more money is needed to provide an adequate and equitable education across our state for all groups of students. Results will likely say that such funding should not be the same for all students because some students have greater learning challenges than others. Regional cost differences in providing quality educational opportunities are likely to be recognized as a factor for funding. The structure of educational offerings also enters into the cost picture – schools offering just K-8 programs cost less than schools providing 9-12 core programs, and comprehensive K-12 school systems cost even more, while cyber schools without transportation and facilities cost much less. School funding formulae need to take all of this into consideration and a thorough school funding study will do just that.

Once we know how much and how to allocate, we need to find a stable and predictable funding source for K-12 education; and that funding source, once identified, needs to be protected for K-12 education. Early childhood programs are powerful and necessary to be part of Michigan's talent development efforts and they need their own stable funding source. Universities, colleges, and community colleges are also required as Michigan develops its talent force but they need their own funding source. We can have PreK-16 articulation and alignment without mixing the funding sources for each. The funding stream for each should be transparent so Michigan taxpayers know what is going where.

Michigan taxpayers have been polled many times by many groups over the last several years. It is clear that they support more money for K-12 education, with the most recent polls showing that support to be 75% and more. It is also clear that voters think funding for schools should go to schools with few strings attached. Over 75% of voters polled recently favored a budget proposal for schools that gave local school leaders the flexibility they needed to meet the needs of their local children and communities. School leaders working in the field agree with the voting public. It is time for policy-makers at the state level to pay attention to what the voting public and expert educators are saying.

To that end the Michigan Department of Education must play a stronger role in communicating with Michigan legislators as well as providing leadership in developing public policy that supports high quality public education.